

Ford, M. R.

The Bayamon Orphanage

In 1898 Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Erwin came to Porto Rico as missionaries under the American Christian Missionary Society. San Juan was the field of their labors. More than two years they gave to preaching, teaching and helpful intercourse with the people, as they met them in the public reading room, in their homes or on the streets. They learned much of the island's conditions and needs. Many were the plans that rose to their minds for helping the people most effectively; but nothing appealed with stronger force than the necessity for Orphanages—homes for the poverty-oppressed, vice-encircled children; homes into which they could be received from the filth and degradation of the streets and slums, where they were living in ignorance and pitiful beggary; homes in which they could be fed, clothed, trained in body and mind, and made fit for life, fitted to be the future home and nation-makers of Porto Rico.

After fully presenting the matter to the attention of the home churches and arousing an interest and concern among them for the work; after unlimited efforts in securing a suitable building, obtaining necessary titles to the same and removing innumerable obstacles and oppositions; after having cleared a path through the wilder-

ness, selected and prepared the site and collected the material, they were ready to send the message to the homeland that one Orphanage was a possibility—an assurance!

Some two years previous the municipal hall of Bayamon had been unroofed and otherwise damaged by a cyclone. This dismantled building the City Council offered, with seven acres of land, for the founding of a home for girls. The Christian Woman's Board of Missions accepted this gift and at once began repairs and improvements.

In August, 1900, though the house was yet unfinished, though debris lay on every side, furniture had not yet arrived, and difficulties surrounded them, Mrs. A. M. Fullen and five girls came into the house as a nucleus for the home that was to be made. By degrees order took the place of chaos, cleanliness and systematic regulations the place of conglomerate confusion and untried efforts. The house was completed, the rubbish removed, fences built, shrubbery and flowers planted, a garden prepared, the rooms furnished, girls received—in short, the home made.

Bayamon being a strong Catholic center, striking opposition was realized. "The house of perdition," the priests and their followers called it, the former even coming to the gate and admonishing the children to flee if they would not lose their souls. The servants never left the house but that similar admonitions reached them. But all was without effect. The Orphanage grew—grew in numbers, in abilities, in power with the people, into a Christian home.

In September, 1901, Miss Nora Collins, of Medina, Ohio, came to be the teacher. Up to that time, owing to her multiplicity of duties as housewife, mother for the little ones, teacher, financial agent of the Board and general mission helper, Mrs. Fullen had been unable to have school but a few hours a day. On Miss Collins' arrival school was opened in earnest. Hardly a sentence in English could the girls understand, and the teacher knew even less Spanish. The courage and patience exerted, as well as the difficulties encountered, may be imagined.

In April, 1902, ill health forced Mrs. Fullen to return to her home in the States. An avalanche of duties and responsibilities were thus left upon the hands of one young woman—the management of a home of now more than fifty members and six hours a day teaching. Providentially, as it seems, a helper in the person of Miss M. E. Sicheloff, an American teacher in the public schools of the town, came to her aid. Together the two carried on the work until July the first, when Miss Sicheloff left for the States. A few days later Mrs. E. L. Collins and Mrs. Maria Reynolds Ford arrived, the former coming to be with her daughter and share the mission work, and the latter to take the matronship of the institution.

"How many girls have you? What are the conditions for admittance? What do you teach them? and What are the main promises of the home?"—these are some of the questions that almost weekly we are called upon by interested, anxious friends to answer.

First, the requirements for admission into the Orphanage: Any orphan girl without means of support, of intelligence and free from contagious or incurable disease, and from four to eight years of age, may enter. As the home has for its prime object the salvation of the island through its future home-makers, its wives and mothers, it is not a refuge for imbeciles nor a hospital. Care is taken in selecting children from among the numerous applicants. Of course, there have been various exceptions to the rules for admission, as at first older girls were received so as to aid with the work, and a number of girls have one parent, while two have both; but conditions were such in their respective cases that it was deemed best to receive them. They enter with the understanding that they are to remain until they are sixteen years of age, unless by disobedience or ill conduct the house needs to expel them. Not a girl yet who has reached her sixteenth year has desired to leave. Here they are taught all forms of housework, washing, ironing, plain and fancy sewing, lace-making, embroidery, drawn work, etc. They are given about ten months a year in the schoolroom, where all the common school branches are taught; are daily instructed in the Bible, and are given every instruction and care possible to de-

velop them into pure, true, noble Christian women—women of more healthful, perfect bodies, of higher aspirations and purposes than their parents; women capable, in both body and mind, of uplifting and promoting the welfare of the island. Already the majority of the girls are Christians, and are exerting an influence for Christ among their friends. Many came full of dishonesty. To lie, to steal or to deceive seemed a part of their natures. These defects have been overcome. Truth and love in all things is becoming the characteristic of the household. Aye, truly Brother Erwin struck the keynote of success when he said, "Found Orphanages." These are far more satisfactory, fuller of direct results, and richer in promises for the future than any other form of mission work. Here lessons can be given, principles inculcated—a thousand little things that go to make up life, that could not possibly be done had the missionaries only the opportunities afforded by regular church services, day school or house association.

Another question, "How are the girls supported?" By interested individual Christian men and women or by the churches of the homeland, usually directly through the National Board of the Christian Woman's Board of Missions. Thirty dollars a year supports a girl—a pitiful sum when we see the wonderful results! Frequently special churches, Sunday Schools, societies or individuals "adopt" a girl—that is, assume her support for a year, or such time as is liked. Oh, how this service is appreciated by the girls! "I am the daughter of Mrs. M., of Ohio;" "The church in Cleveland is my good mother," are some of their expressions. Far more do they appreciate being the daughter of some special individual or church than of the world in general. Is there not human nature in this?

So stands the Bayamon Christian Orphanage to-day—a beehive of industry; a progressing, happy, Americanized, fairly English-speaking family—a home in a land needing homes!

No, her efforts and influences are not wholly shut up within her own walls. So high are the educational advantages offered by the Orphanage over the other private institutions of the town, so highly are they appreciated,

so changed is public opinion, that opposition and censure have given place to approval and praise. As an instance, rarely is a townsman heard to call the institution the "Orphanage," but instead the "College" or "Bayamon's College." With our crowded quarters and forty-eight girls of various grades, it is almost impossible to receive the day pupils. Daily we give ourselves the hope, and the people a suggestion of a promise, that *some time* we can have both room and further teaching force.

The mission work in general is indeed progressing. During the month of January Mr. Taylor baptized more than thirty people; a new mission was opened and more helpers employed. The Christian Woman's Board of Missions has now in its employ a young lady—Damasa Cintron—as a house-to-house worker. She has been with the Orphanage since its founding as dormitory matron. A young lady of good family, of pleasing manners, of strong Christian zeal and courage, she is a potent influence for good among her own people. Once a strong Catholic, she is able to meet and counteract many errors. So strong are the prejudices of the people, so rigid are their conventionalities, that a man can not enter into the homes and do this private, personal work among the women and children. Already is the wisdom of employing a woman helper exemplified.

Hardly a week passes without bringing people to the Orphanage doors, begging that children may be received into the home. But our crowded condition compels us to say no. Hardly a week passes without bringing calls from the island towns for the Gospel, and hardly a week passes without seeing some soul accept Christ.

Yes, the work is encouraging.

Bayamon, Porto Rico.

MARIA REYNOLDS FORD.



“One small life in God’s great plan,
How futile it seems as the ages roll,
Do what it may, or strive how it can,
To alter the sweep of the infinite whole!
A single stitch in an endless web,
A drop in the ocean’s flow and ebb!
But the pattern is rent where the stitch is lost,
Or marred where the tangled threads have crossed;
And each life that fails of the true intent
Mars the perfect plan that its Master meant.”